

Mexican Workers in the United States Labour Market: a Contemporary Dilemma

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EVER SINCE the present political boundary separating Mexico and the United States was established in 1848 by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and partially amended in 1853 by the Gadsden Purchase, there has been migration of Mexican citizens into the United States. In fact the border between the two nations was completely open until, with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, the Border Patrol was established and it became a felony to enter the United States illegally. No quota, however, was applied to immigration from Mexico until 1968. During that year legislation became effective which restricted total annual immigration from *all* Western Hemisphere nations to 120,000, with a maximum of 40,000 from any one country. Both these figures are regularly exceeded. In 1973, for instance, there were 173,123 legal immigrants from all Western Hemisphere nations, including 70,141 Mexicans. That the real flow exceeds the quotas is explained by the numerous exemptions allowed. With the exception of only three years since 1960, legal immigration from Mexico to the United States has exceeded that of every other nation in the world.

Yet the primary characteristic of the flow of Mexicans into the United States is not legal but *illegal* migration. During 1973, for example, 655,968 illegal immigrants were apprehended in the United States by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) of the US Department of Justice. Of these, 88 per cent were of Mexican origin. To be sure, the figures are somewhat misleading in that there is double counting (i.e. the same individuals were arrested more than once during the year). But, when it is realised that those who are actually apprehended represent only a small fraction of the real flow, the essential thrust of the argument is not dulled. The INS has officially estimated that in the 1970s upwards

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of 4 million aliens who enter the United States illegally each year remain undetected.¹ Many stay for only a short time; others commute to their homeland on a seasonal basis; while others have simply become the equivalent of permanent residents. In total, the INS estimates that there are between 7 and 12 million illegal immigrants currently residing in the United States.² The majority of each category of illegal immigrant—those who are apprehended each year, those flowing in who are *not* apprehended each year, and the cumulative total of those who have gone undetected over the years—are of Mexican origin.

With the number of illegal immigrants annually exceeding the number of legal immigrants in the ratio of about 10 to 1, it is not surprising that the Commissioner of the INS, Leonard F. Chapman, exclaimed in 1974: "The United States is being overrun by illegal aliens."³ Moreover, immense as the size of the migration already is, he warned the nation that "we are seeing just the beginning of the problem".³

The nature of Mexican migration

The migration of Mexicans into the United States is largely a twentieth-century phenomenon. Illegal entry from Mexico started after the Second World War. To understand the current situation, however, it is necessary to review briefly its historical evolution.

At the conclusion of the Mexican-American War in 1848, the vast land area—approximately the size of contemporary India—that was ceded by Mexico to the United States contained only about 75,000 Mexican citizens. At least two-thirds of these were concentrated in the northern area of the present-day state of New Mexico. The remainder were spread out in small enclaves throughout the huge region that is now known as the American Southwest. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century there were very few Mexican immigrants (see table 1).

In fact, it was not until the period 1910-19 that Mexican migration began in earnest. The immediate cause was the extreme violence associated with the Mexican Revolutionary War then raging. Near the end of that decade, there were also considerable "pull" factors generated in the United States as a result of labour shortages associated with American entry into the First World War. The need for Mexican workers was especially acute in the agricultural sector. The upward immigration trend

¹ Lawrence Meyer: "Aliens hard to count", in *Washington Post*, 2 Feb. 1975, pp. A-1 and A-12.

² "Statement" by Leonard F. Chapman, Commissioner, Immigration and Naturalization Service (Chicago, 17 Sep. 1974; mimeographed), p. 2. See also "Address by the Honorable William B. Saxbe, Attorney General of the United States, before the Cameron County and Hidalgo County Bar Associations" (Brownsville (Texas), 30 Oct. 1974; mimeographed), p. 2.

³ "Can't stop alien flood, official says", in *San Antonio Express*, 23 Oct. 1974, p. 1.

Mexican Workers in the USA

TABLE 1. LEGAL IMMIGRATION FROM MEXICO TO THE UNITED STATES, 1869-1973

Year	Immigrants	Year	Immigrants	Year	Immigrants
1869	320	1904	1 009	1939	2 265
1870	463	1905	2 637	1940	1 914
1871	402	1906	1 997	1941	2 068
1872	569	1907	1 406	1942	2 182
1873	606	1908	6 067	1943	3 985
1874	386	1909	16 251	1944	6 399
1875	610	1910	17 760	1945	6 455
1876	631	1911	18 784	1946	6 805
1877	445	1912	22 001	1947	7 775
1878	465	1913	10 954	1948	8 730
1879	556	1914	13 089	1949	7 977
1880	492	1915	10 993	1950	6 841
1881	325	1916	17 198	1951	6 372
1882	366	1917	16 438	1952	9 600
1883	469	1918	17 602	1953	18 454
1884	430	1919	28 844	1954	37 456
1885	323	1920	51 042	1955	50 772
1886	.	1921	29 603	1956	65 047
1887	.	1922	18 246	1957	49 154
1888	.	1923	62 709	1958	26 712
1889	.	1924	87 648	1959	23 061
1890	.	1925	32 378	1960	32 684
1891	.	1926	42 638	1961	41 632
1892	.	1927	66 766	1962	55 291
1893	.	1928	57 765	1963	55 253
1894	109	1929	38 980	1964	32 967
1895	116	1930	11 915	1965	37 969
1896	150	1931	2 627	1966	45 163
1897	91	1932	1 674	1967	42 371
1898	107	1933	1 514	1968	43 563
1899	163	1934	1 470	1969	44 623
1900	237	1935	1 232	1970	44 469
1901	347	1936	1 308	1971	50 103
1902	709	1937	1 918	1972	64 040
1903	528	1938	2 014	1973	70 141

Total, 1869-1973 ... 1 737 185

Sources: For years 1869-1969 the data are taken from table 1-A of a mimeographed paper, "Mexican immigration", presented by Julian Samora at the Conference on Economic and Educational Perspectives of the Mexican American, Aspen (Colorado), 27 August 1972; the figures for 1970-73 are from annual reports of the US Immigration and Naturalization Service.

continued throughout the 1920s but, as seen in table 1, it was abruptly curtailed during the depression decade of the 1930s.

By the 1940s economic conditions had changed markedly. The military manpower requirements associated with the Second World War and its related manufacturing employment needs led to another labour shortage in the agricultural sector. The agricultural growers of the Southwest had foreseen these developments prior to the Pearl Harbour attack in 1941. They had made two fateful decisions: first, the pool of cheap labour in Mexico was to be tapped to fill the manpower deficit; second, the Federal Government was to be the vehicle of deliverance.¹

The initial request of growers for the establishment of a contract labour programme was denied by the Federal Government in 1941. By mid-1942, however, the US Government favoured the programme but the Government of Mexico balked. The unregulated hiring of Mexican citizens by foreign nations had been prohibited by article 123 of the Mexican Constitution in 1917. Ultimately, negotiations between the two governments resulted in agreement. The Mexican Labour Programme, better known as "the bracero programme", was launched in August 1942. Mexican workers were afforded numerous protections with respect to housing, transportation, food, medical needs and wage rates. The programme was extended by subsequent enactment until 1947. For the growers the bracero programme proved to be a bonanza.² Braceros were limited exclusively to agricultural work. When the original agreement ended on 31 December 1947 the programme continued informally and unregulated until 1951. In that year, again under the guise of another war-related labour shortage, it was revived by Public Law 78 and continued to function until it was unilaterally terminated by the United States on 31 December 1964. Since then, the Government of Mexico has made numerous proposals for its resumption but, to date, the United States has not acceded.³

As can be seen in table 2, the beginning of the illegal immigration flow from Mexico roughly approximates the years of the bracero programme. It has become especially heavy since the termination of the programme in 1964.⁴ Unquestionably, many illegal immigrants were former braceros who had been attracted to the Mexican border towns from the rural interior of central and northern Mexico by the existence of the contract labour programme. It would be too simplistic, however, to

¹ Ernesto Galarza: *Merchants of labor: the Mexican bracero story* (Charlotte (North Carolina), McNally and Loftin, 1964).

² Carey McWilliams: *North from Mexico* (New York, Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 267.

³ See for example "Mexico to seek farm labor pact", in *New York Times*, 17 June 1973.

⁴ The exceptionally large totals shown in the table for the early 1950s result from a determined drive ("Operation Clean Sweep") to arrest and deport the accumulations of illegal Mexican immigrants that had built up over the years. Any similar effort during the early 1970s would have produced far higher figures.

TABLE 2. ILLEGAL MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS APPREHENDED AND/OR DEPORTED, 1924-73

Year	Immigrants	Year	Immigrants	Year	Immigrants
1924	4 614	1941	6 082	1958	45 164
1925	2 961	1942	10 603	1959	42 732
1926	4 047	1943	16 154	1960	39 750
1927	4 495	1944	39 449	1961	39 860
1928	5 529	1945	80 760	1962	41 200
1929	8 538	1946	116 320	1963	51 230
1930	18 319	1947	214 543	1964	41 589
1931	8 409	1948	193 852	1965	48 948
1932	7 116	1949	289 400	1966	89 683
1933	15 875	1950	469 581	1967	107 695
1934	8 910	1951	510 355	1968	142 520
1935	9 139	1952	531 719	1969	189 572
1936	9 534	1953	839 149	1970	265 539
1937	9 535	1954	1 035 282	1971	348 178
1938	8 684	1955	165 186	1972	430 213
1939	9 376	1956	58 792	1973	576 823
1940	8 051	1957	45 640		
Total, 1924-73 ... 7 266 695					

Note: There is a considerable problem with the exact figures used to report illegal immigrants. The official definitions have changed over time. Nevertheless, these figures do reflect correctly the orders of magnitude.

Sources: For the years 1924-41 see Samora: "Mexican immigration", op. cit., table III; for 1942-73 see Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.: *The Mexico-United States border: public policy and Chicano economic welfare*, Studies in Human Resource Development No. 2 (Austin (Texas), Center for the Study of Human Resources and Bureau of Business Research, 1974), p. 9.

conclude that the problem would not have eventually surfaced in the absence of the programme. For mass migrations of people always involve a combination of both "push" and "pull" forces and this movement is no exception.¹

In addition to the sheer numbers of people involved, it is important to note that the characteristics of legal and illegal Mexican immigrants are quite different. The features of each category tell much about the consequence of the immigration process for the United States labour market.

¹ For a more complete discussion of these "push" and "pull" forces see Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.: *Mexican migration and the US labor market: a mounting issue for the seventies*, Studies in Human Resource Development No. 3 (Austin (Texas), Center for the Study of Human Resources and Bureau of Business Research, 1975), Ch. 4.

Looking first at the legal immigrants, it is necessary to place Mexican immigrants in the context of all legal immigrants. The immigration system of the United States since 1968 has been designed to achieve three goals: to reunite families; to admit workers with skills that are in short supply; and to permit entry to specified groups of political refugees.¹ Since the end of the Second World War and with the enactment of major immigration statutes in 1952 and 1965, the characteristics of legal immigrants to the United States have tended to resemble the over-all characteristic norms of the United States population.²

In many ways the legal immigrants from Mexico during the past 25 years have approximated the patterns for *all* legal immigrants to the United States. That is to say, the number of females among them slightly exceeds the number of males, their marital status distribution is about the same, they have a strong preference for urban areas, and they have approximately the same labour force participation rate as the United States average. There are, however, several important differences between legal Mexican immigrants and other legal immigrants. The foremost difference is the overwhelming preference of Mexican immigrants to reside in one of the five southwestern states (Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas). Legal Mexican immigrants are more likely to have friends and relatives who are already citizens of the United States than are other immigrant groups. More importantly, legal Mexican immigrants tend to have a significantly different occupational distribution from that of those from other nations. For although Mexican immigrants have backgrounds in most occupations, a disproportionately high number are in blue-collar employment, with higher concentrations in the occupations of craftsman, household service worker, non-farm labourer, and farm labourer.³

For illegal Mexican immigrants the statistical profile is, of course, more difficult to specify as the actual universe is unknown. Even those apprehended are often reluctant to answer questions honestly. Nevertheless, from the limited research results that are available, it is obvious that they have a distinctly different set of characteristics from those of legal Mexican immigrants. Typically the illegal immigrant from Mexico is male, usually unmarried, younger than 30 years of age, unskilled, from a rural area, poorly educated, speaks little if any English, is likely to be employed at least some time in the rural economy of the United States, and is most likely to be employed in an unskilled occupation as either a

¹ David S. North and William G. Weissert: *Immigrants and the American labor market*, research report to the US Department of Labor under contract number 20-11-73-01 (Washington, TransCentury Corporation, 1973), pp. 7-8. See also Elliott Abrams and Franklin S. Abrams: "Immigration policy—who gets in and why", in *Public Interest* (New York), Winter, 1975, pp. 3-29.

² North and Weissert, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

farm or a non-farm labourer.¹ The INS estimates that one-third of the illegal immigrants from Mexico are employed in agriculture; another third in other goods-producing industries (especially meatpacking, automobile manufacturing and construction); and one-third in service jobs.² These industrial employment patterns are quite distinct from the prevailing patterns for the American labour force.

There is some degree of inter-relationship between the legal and illegal flows. Many an illegal Mexican immigrant later becomes a legal immigrant through marriage to a US citizen; or by having a child born in the United States who is eligible for citizenship; or by making contact with a sympathetic community organisation or an influential employer willing to plead his case. Should one of these circumstances occur, it is likely that he will be able to gain admission outside the established immigrant quota system.

Economic implications for both nations

For the United States

Throughout the twentieth century the immigration policy of the United States with respect to Mexico has been characterised by the complete domination of labour policy over settlement considerations. Mexicans have been more desired as workers than as permanent citizens. The timidity with which the United States has approached the wholesale violation of its immigration laws by Mexicans in the 1960s and 1970s only proves again the validity of this assertion. Initially at least, illegal Mexican immigrants are not likely to bring their families with them. They therefore do a considerable amount of commuting back and forth across the border and many of them are in their homeland during the off-seasons (usually the winter months) of the industries in which they work. As a result they place a smaller burden on American community services or funds (e.g. housing, schooling, health, etc.) than would be the case if they came, together with their families, as permanent immigrants. With the passage of time, however, and as their numbers have increased, these features have become less marked. Families now tend to come along with the breadwinner. Other aliens marry US citizens. And an increasing number are beginning to find permanent year-round jobs (especially as more of them have begun to find non-farm employment).

The historical importance of Mexican immigrants to the American economy has been as a source of low-wage labour, principally in agriculture and ranching, in the rural Southwest. This is a vast land area

¹ Julian Samora: *Los mojadros: the wetback story* (Notre Dame (Indiana), Notre Dame Press, 1971), Ch. VI.

² Robert F. Mathieson: "Influx of illegal aliens and the unemployment rate", in *Houston Chronicle*, 3 Jan. 1975, Section 1, p. 13.

composed of scattered population clusters. The climate is dry and water is very scarce. The population pattern is often referred to as being "an oasis society". Hence, the large agricultural growers and ranchers have usually not been able to draw upon a local labour supply. Their manpower needs are especially acute in the planting and harvesting seasons. During and following the Second World War, the growers and ranchers of the region became heavily dependent upon the bracero workers and, after the termination of the bracero programme, upon illegal Mexican immigrants for the seasonal labour supply.

The effect of the inflow of Mexican workers into the rural Southwest was felt most directly by the citizen workers who had traditionally composed the rural labour force. This group was largely made up of Mexican-Americans (called hereafter Chicanos).¹ The bracero programme depressed domestic wage rates and retarded the normal market pressures that would have led to rising agricultural wages in the Southwest. Indeed their level, relative to wages in the non-agricultural sectors, declined sharply.² Since the end of the bracero programme, the illegal immigrants have had the same effect. The citizen workers who had hitherto been the mainstay of the regional labour force began an exodus. In the US censuses of 1950 and 1960 the Chicano population were the least urbanised of any of the major racial groups in the Southwest; by the census of 1970 they were the most highly urbanised group in the region. Most of the displaced Chicanos were totally unprepared for work and life in an urban setting. In this way, the illegal immigrants have caused serious hardship for the sizable Chicano labour force of the Southwest.

The illegal Mexican immigrants have also had another adverse effect upon the Chicanos. It is no accident that about half of the remaining seasonal migratory agricultural workers in the United States are Chicanos who come from the south Texas region bordering on Mexico. Many Chicanos of this region are literally *forced* to join the migratory labour force because the local labour market is overrun by illegal Mexican immigrants and border commuters (i.e. people who live in Mexico with its lower cost of living but, because of ambiguities in the immigration statutes, are able to work legally in the United States).³ Public policy in the United States has repeatedly attempted to improve the economic plight of these citizen workers by training them for non-migrant voca-

¹ The word "Chicano" is increasingly being used in the United States to refer to the group of citizens generally called "Mexican-Americans" in the literature. It is actually preferred by militant Chicanos because it accentuates the fact that many of them feel they are treated as Mexicans in the United States but as Americans in Mexico. In fact "Chicano" is said to be a word used by the indigenous Indian population of northern rural Mexico to refer to Spanish-blooded Mexicans. The Indians pronounced the word "Mexicano" as "Meh-chee-cano" and, over the years shortened it simply to "Chicano".

² Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.: *Chicanos and rural poverty*, Policy Studies in Employment and Welfare No. 16 (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1973), Ch. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-44.

tions. But all the programmes adopted have failed since they have been unable to tackle the basic problem that causes internal migrancy, namely the scarcity of job opportunities in the Chicanos' home communities offering wages at a level that will permit a decent standard of life. The depressing forces caused by the influx of illegal Mexican immigrants and by the border commuters have set in motion a process whereby poor Mexicans make poor Chicanos poorer.¹

The presence of illegal Mexican immigrants has constantly undermined the efforts of workers in low-wage industries of the Southwest to become unionised. Often it so depresses wages and working conditions that citizen workers who might otherwise seek to establish a trade union are forced to look elsewhere for employment. If they do remain in the industry and attempt to form a union, the illegal Mexican immigrants are frequently used as strike-breakers. The most prominent contemporary example is the on-going efforts of the United Farm Workers (UFW) to establish a union for agricultural workers in California. Cesar Chavez, the leader of the UFW, has repeatedly charged that employers are using illegal Mexican aliens as strike-breakers.² He has stated that it is primarily because of the inability to keep them out of the fields that his union has had to appeal for a nation-wide boycott as the only effective method of exerting pressure on employers for bargaining recognition.³

Since the mid-1960s, however, a growing number of illegal Mexican immigrants have gone directly to urban areas to find low-skilled jobs. The more experienced of them have found that the urban areas often pay more, the work is less arduous, and it is just as easy to get "lost" in the urban barrio as it is in the open spaces of the rural areas. Also, agriculture is becoming more and more mechanised, which means that labour requirements have been diminishing rapidly in rural areas.

Although there are a few notable exceptions, the vast majority of alien workers find employment in what is increasingly being referred to as "the secondary labour market" of the American economy.⁴ The secondary labour market is characterised by low wages, little job security, high employee turnover rates and few if any job rights; usually the workers are not unionised. In this market the alien worker competes with large numbers of citizen workers for the menial jobs that characterise it. The citizen workers, who are disproportionately from racial and ethnic minorities, are at an even greater disadvantage because of the presence of the aliens. For the aliens will frequently work harder, be more grateful

¹ Briggs: *The Mexico-United States border* . . . , op. cit., pp. 10-21.

² See for example "Chavez charges scheme", in *Washington Post*, 23 Sep. 1974, p. C-3.

³ Richard Severo: "The flight of the wetbacks", in *New York Times Magazine*, 10 Mar. 1974, p. 81.

⁴ Michael J. Piore: "The 'new immigration' and the presumptions of social policy", in *Proceedings of the Twenty-seventh Annual Winter Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association* (Madison, Industrial Relations Research Association, 1975), pp. 350-358.

for a job opportunity, and be more docile in their acceptance of arbitrary treatment. The citizen worker must either live and work at the level of the illegal immigrant; or become unemployed; or live on public welfare; or turn to criminal activity; or move to another region if he can.¹ As the American economy is currently organised, the only hope for improving the economic situation of the citizen workers in the secondary labour market is to reduce the supply of workers entering it. Although illegal immigrants are not the only source of workers for secondary jobs, it does appear that their significance is increasing rapidly. In fact, one noted authority on the economics of low-wage labour markets in the United States recently observed: "Virtually unnoticed, illegal aliens have become a factor of tremendous—and still explosively growing—importance." ²

With regard to the legal immigrants from Mexico, they too are exerting a substantial quantitative impact on certain labour markets of the Southwest. This is because they have not sought to distribute themselves in any random way but have shown a preference for urban areas rather than suburban or rural areas; for the states of California and Texas rather than others; and for certain occupations rather than a broad array of jobs. Unfortunately, too little attention has been given to this aspect of Mexican immigration.

The implications for Mexico

The impetus for outward migration from Mexico in the 1970s is *not* due to a stagnant Mexican economy. On the contrary, Mexico has for the past decade had the fastest rate of economic growth of any country in Latin America. The gross national product since the late 1960s has been increasing annually at a rate of 6 per cent or more and per capita income at about 3 per cent.³ Yet most of the benefits of industrialisation accrue disproportionately to the small upper-income sector. Pitifully little filters down to the vast lower-income group.⁴

In addition, the Mexican economy is undergoing structural changes which result in high rates of unemployment, particularly in the cities on the United States border, where they consistently hover in the 30-40 per cent range.⁵ For many farmers and agricultural workers in Mexico's

¹ Samora: *Los mojados: the wetback story*, op. cit., p. 56.

² Michael J. Piore: "Comment and discussion" on a paper entitled "Primary and secondary labor markets: a critique of the dual approach", in *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* (Washington), No. 3, 1974, p. 687.

³ Alejandro Portes: "Return of the wetback", in *Society* (New Brunswick (New Jersey)), Mar.-Apr. 1974, p. 44.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For a good discussion of economic conditions in the Mexican border cities see Liborio V. Calderón: "Foreign assembly industries in Mexico: a necessary evil of an underdeveloped society"; Giorgi Berni: "Border industry; the case of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua"; and David Barkin: "Mexico's albatross: the United States economy", all of which are papers

central and northern states, a hundred days of employment a year is the most that can be expected. When work is available, it is often of a hard physical nature for which the monetary reward is but a pittance. Moreover, because of the inordinately high birth rates in the recent past, the adult workforce in Mexico will almost double between 1970 and 1980.

Closely associated with the pace of industrialisation and the incidence of poverty is the existence throughout Mexico of a strong secular trend of rural to urban migration. In 1970 only 41.3 per cent of Mexico's population resided in rural areas. The internal migrations have been towards two destinations: Mexico City and the northern cities located along the United States border. For example, the aggregate population increase of these border towns was 44 per cent in the decade 1960-70.

Thus, from the Mexican Government's standpoint, the massive migration of its citizens to the United States accomplishes two important economic objectives. First, it represents a critical "safety-valve" for reducing the pressure of internal unrest that could arise from its surplus labour force and severe maldistribution of income. Secondly, illegal immigrants frequently bring or send back portions of their earnings. In the aggregate it is believed that these amounts represent a substantial sum of US dollars, and illegal entry is therefore an important source of desperately needed foreign exchange to help Mexico's balance of trade.

Little is known about the effects on the Mexican economy of the exodus of its legal immigrants to the United States. Yet the eligibility requirements of legal entry into the United States place a premium on highly educated and skilled heads of households—precisely the people that the Mexican economy can least afford to lose.

The consequences

Despite the growing magnitude of Mexican migration to the United States in the 1970s, it is very doubtful that either country has much to gain by the continuation of this process. In fact, many people on both sides of the border are definitely harmed. An immigration process that is overwhelmingly dominated by illegal procedures can generate little that is good, for the participants frequently are easy prey for the most exploitative elements in *both* societies.

To begin with, it is usually harmful to the illegal immigrants themselves. Given their economic alternatives, it might seem that they would only benefit by their participation in the American workforce. This is often *not* the case. Illegal entry is rapidly becoming institutionalised. Organised smuggling is commonplace. Dangerous and frequently

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inhuman methods are often used to transport the human cargo. Smugglers' fees are high. So are the related charges for forged documents (social security cards, driver's licences, alien registration cards, etc.). The costs are often so high that the aliens must borrow the needed money at exorbitantly high interest rates.¹ Frequently their lives are endangered if they cannot quickly locate a job or, if employed, keep up with their payments.

The alien workers are also frequently victimised by employers who know of their vulnerability to detection. Accounts of alien workers receiving less than the federal minimum wage; not having their social security deductions reported; being turned-in to the authorities by employers just prior to pay day; not receiving overtime premiums; and being personally abused are legion. For as one government official who decried the exploitation of alien workers exclaimed: "Nobody gives a damn, since aliens are nobody's constituents." ²

Likewise, the living standards of many illegal immigrants are often deplorable. They have to compete for the already scarce low-income housing and other community services available for all those who live on the bottom rung of the American economy. Perhaps the best summary statement has been provided by Professor Julian Samora in his seminal sociological study of illegal Mexican immigrants:

... The illegal, whatever his motivations and aspirations, probably moves from poverty to greater poverty and, whatever his experiences, the economic and financial benefit for Mexico, for his family and for himself is small. Those who profit are those who employ him or smuggle him.³

The harmful effect that the alien workers exert in the United States has already been discussed in the preceding section. The burden is carried largely by the citizen workers in the large secondary labour force. The massive inflow of illegal immigrants is seriously disrupting the normal labour market adjustment processes. This is especially true throughout the Southwest and is rapidly becoming the case in a number of urban labour markets outside this region. A "shadow labour force" has evolved whose presence is often felt but seldom seen. It is composed of a body of workers who are totally dependent upon the terms of employment set by employers.

Indirectly, the United States itself suffers from the presence of an increasing number of illegal Mexican immigrants. Some short-run private sector gains may be realised by the exploitation of the alien workers. But in the long run, the presence of a growing number of workers who are denied political rights as well as minimum legal and job protection; who

¹ See for example "Police giving aid to illegal aliens: action stirred in effort to curb exploitation", in *New York Times*, 23 Mar. 1975, p. L-23.

² Laura A. Kierman: "5 deported aliens sue for Md. wages", in *Washington Post*, 23 Sep. 1974, p. C-2.

³ Samora: *Los mojados: the wetback story*, op. cit., p. 105.

often live at a survival level and in constant fear of being detected; who work in the most competitive and least unionised sectors of the economy; and who are often victimised by criminal elements is a prescription for eventual trouble. Over the nearly two centuries of its existence, the United States has developed numerous laws, programmes, and institutions that have sought to reduce the magnitude of human cruelty and the incidence of economic uncertainty for most of its citizens. For the illegal immigrant workers, however, these benefits are virtually non-existent. It would be self-deception to believe that this situation can continue to deteriorate at the current rate without eventual dire consequences to all parties concerned.

Border industrialisation efforts

Following the unilateral termination of the bracero programme on 31 December 1964, both the United States and Mexico began a search for ways to assist Mexico in adjusting to the new situation. As indicated earlier, the population of the Mexican border cities grew immensely during the life of the programme. The burden of the displaced braceros added to the already severe problems of unemployment, underemployment and poverty in these border areas.

Mexico responded to the situation by launching, in May 1965, the Border Industries Programme (Programa de Industrialización Fronterizo), also commonly known as the "twin plants programme". The Mexican Government had noted that the tariff codes of the United States¹ allow foreign-based subsidiaries that are 100 per cent owned by US firms to assemble products whose parts were originally manufactured within the United States. These can then be shipped back to the parent firm in the United States for "finishing" and for sale. Essentially, the effect of the provisions is to apply the duty (between 7 and 15 per cent) only to the value added to the assembled products.

A number of modifications were required of Mexico's own laws, which made the operation and taxation of foreign firms within its territory² subject to stringent regulations. Hence it was not until June 1966 that the programme became operative. A free trade zone, 12.5 miles wide, was established along the entire 1,800 mile length of the United States-Mexico border. In March 1971 the Mexican Government extended the programme to a coastal strip and in November 1972 to the entire nation.³

¹ The relevant parts of the tariff codes are sections 806.30 and 807.00. The former section, enacted in 1953, applies to the assembly of products made of metal components originally manufactured in the United States. The latter provision was adopted in 1963. It simply gave legal sanction to prevailing practices whereby a variety of products produced by US firms could be exported for assembly and re-enter the country if the condition of the parts had not changed.

² Calderón, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-9.

³ See also Susumu Watanabe: "Constraints on labour-intensive export industries in Mexico", in *International Labour Review*, Jan. 1974, especially pp. 39-41.

As mentioned above, the import duties on the goods re-entering the United States are assessed only on the value added to the product. This is basically nothing more than the wages paid to the unskilled workers who do the assembly work. In the case of Mexico, minimum wages are set by the national Government but vary by locality. In general they range from one-third to one-sixth of the comparable wages in the United States.¹ The participating US firms, however, are required to pay 50 per cent more than the prevailing legal minimum wage in each Mexican city.

A significant boost to the growth of the programme occurred in 1970 when the US Tariff Commission released a special report on the employment impact of the relevant sections of the tariff code. The report concluded that the aggregate benefits exceed the aggregate costs and recommended that the provisions remain as they were.² In the wake of the report the number of US firms participating in the programme increased sharply. By 1972 there were 345 of them with total employment of more than 46,000 workers.³ By mid-1974 the number of firms had increased to over 500 with more than 70,000 employees.⁴

In late 1974 and early 1975, however, the programme suffered several setbacks. In the wake of mounting inflationary pressures, the Government of Mexico doubled its minimum wages in all localities in late 1974. In addition, the serious recession that hit the United States economy in 1974 led a number of American firms to close their Mexican operations in order to reduce their unsold inventories. But perhaps the most serious challenge to the programme is contained in the provisions of the Trade Act of 1974 of the United States, which became effective in January 1975. Under this new Act cotton goods that had been made into parts of clothing in the United States and shipped to Mexico for final sewing into finished garments are now counted as a part of the allowable quota of Mexican cotton exports to the United States. As about 25 per cent of the plants in Mexico that are included in the Border Industries Programme are involved in textiles, many are threatened by the terms of this new Act. For all these reasons, it was reported as of April 1975 that the number of participating American firms had declined to about 430 with Mexican employment falling to about 60,000 workers.⁵

From Mexico's standpoint it is ironic that the twin plants programme is a contradiction to its own border development strategy. In

¹ Susan C. Fouts: "Mexican border industrialization: an analogy and a comment", paper presented to the Conference on Economic Relations between Mexico and the United States, Austin, 16-20 April 1973, p. 9.

² US Tariff Commission: *Economic factors affecting the use of items 807.00 and 806.30 of the Tariff Schedules of the United States* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1970).

³ Texas Good Neighbor Commission: *Texas migrant labor: annual report 1972* (Austin, 1972). Also see "Spread of US plants to Mexico brings a boom—and complaints", in *US News and World Report* (Washington), 27 Mar. 1972, p. 59.

⁴ Information provided by the Texas Good Neighbor Commission, 28 April 1975.

⁵ *Ibid.*

1960 Mexico enacted its National Frontier Programme (Programa Nacional Fronterizo, or PRONAF), which sought to diversify the economy of its northern states as part of an effort to reduce the region's dependency on the US economy. The twin plants programme, however, has sharply increased the nation's dependency on the United States. Moreover, the restrictive assembly jobs will not stimulate additional economic activity, since by the regulations that govern the programme, there cannot be any related industries. Although the programme was allegedly conceived to meet the needs of unemployed older men (i.e. the former *braceros*), the nature of the assembly work is such that about 85 per cent of the Mexican employees are women between 18 and 24 years of age.¹ Thus it is unlikely that the over-all impact of the programme is beneficial to Mexico's own long-run interests.

The type of industrialisation programme that is needed is one that conforms to the original objectives of PRONAF. It should not be based entirely upon decisions made by private American business firms. But because of the effects of its past labour practices, which encouraged Mexican migration to the border areas, the United States Government should make overtures to Mexico concerning how the economy of Mexico's northern states could be developed. Financial and technical aid should be made available. Mexico, however, should design the regional plan and set its own priorities. Concomitantly the United States should carefully reassess its trade and tariff policies as they pertain to Mexico. Efforts should be initiated at once to lessen the restrictive barriers to agricultural and manufacturing imports from Mexico. Not only would such action enhance the opportunities for Mexican export industries to expand and, hopefully, reduce some of the pressures causing illegal entry, but it would acknowledge the fact that Mexico is already a major importer of American-made goods.

Concluding observations

The current migration of Mexicans into the United States represents one of the major migration inflows in the history of the nation. The most prominent characteristic of this mass migration is its illegal and unregulated character. Unfortunately, neither the Government of Mexico nor that of the United States has to date been willing to acknowledge the importance of the problem. Mexico has been content merely to complain about alleged abuses of some illegal immigrants who have been arrested and detained by the US authorities and to propose that a contract labour programme similar to the old *bracero* programme be introduced. The United States Government is just beginning to recognise the full ramifica-

¹ Fouts, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

tions of the issue. Having for too long stressed only the benefits, the United States is starting to realise that there are extensive human costs as well.

The policy of the United States with respect to legal and illegal Mexican immigrants has never functioned in a vacuum. It has been related to domestic economic policy, in the sense that it has been the subject of greater concern during periods of high unemployment than in times of low unemployment; to labour policy, a strong interest being shown in Mexicans as temporary and seasonal workers for low-wage industries, less so as permanent settlers; and to racial policy, in that Mexicans are a racial and ethnic minority group who over the years have been treated by many other White Americans in a discriminatory manner. For these reasons it is not easy to untangle the present problem from its historical evolution.

Nevertheless, the situation is currently out of hand and, if policy measures are not initiated soon, may become uncontrollable. Some of the measures that are urgently needed are discussed below.

With respect to legal Mexican immigrants, there is the point that their impact is unevenly felt; specific cities and states have been hard hit. To facilitate the absorption of these new citizens, the US Government should provide "special impact" funds to community organisations which assist in their settlement. Ample precedent for such funds already exists in the form of programmes of assistance to local areas where large military bases or other federal organisations are located. In addition, special programmes should be initiated in these areas to inform immigrants of their legal rights and of the training and job placement facilities available to them; special classes in English should also be provided, with ample financial stipends for attendance.

Another urgently needed reform concerns the labour certification procedures associated with new immigrants. The Immigration Act of 1965 requires that a shortage of workers must exist in the applicant's particular occupation and that his or her presence will not adversely affect prevailing wages and working conditions. The problem is that the certification is made only *once*—when the initial application for immigration is filed—and there is no subsequent check that the requirements are actually met. It has been suggested, therefore, that a system be adopted to ensure that the legal immigrant workers do not in fact seek employment in overcrowded occupations or economically depressed areas, or serve as strike-breakers, or become employees of certain employers with histories of illegal activities.¹ The system would provide for a probationary period of, say, one year, during which time it could be ascertained whether the certification conditions are actually being fulfilled. Apart from this problem, the present system has too many loopholes to

¹ North and Weissert, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-180.

be meaningful. In a 1971 study of the topic it was found that only one out of every 13 immigrants to the United States was subject to certification.¹

It is, of course, the illegal Mexican immigrants that constitute the major influx of labour into the United States in the 1970s. Some effort must be made to reduce the dimensions of this migration to manageable proportions. The presence of a "shadow" labour force of rightless individuals is bad for both the aliens and the United States. But of no less consequence than the exploitation of these illegal immigrants is the fact that, collectively, they constitute a clear and present danger to the standard of living of all with whom they compete for jobs, housing and community services. The Chicano citizens of the Southwest have borne disproportionately the weight of this burden. But other groups and other geographic areas are increasingly being affected by the growing numbers of illegal immigrants.

For these reasons a number of changes are required. One is the elimination of the absurd situation whereby US employers are virtually immune from prosecution when they employ illegal immigrants. Legislation making this a criminal offence should be adopted at once. This can only be done at the federal level since immigration policy is considered to be solely the province of the Federal Government. Such a statute can only strengthen efforts to ensure that immigration is not used as a source of cheap and rightless workers who threaten the welfare of citizen workers and retard attempts to do away with low-paying and exploitative jobs by their willingness to accept substandard conditions. Legitimate fears have been expressed by some minority groups—especially some Chicano community organisations—concerning the possibility of abuse of such legislation.² But once attention has been drawn to these areas of potential trouble, it should be possible to exercise sufficient vigilance to ensure that such distortions of legislative purpose do not occur.

In addition to sanctions against employers, there is a vital need to increase the manpower and budget of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to a level commensurate with the scale of its responsibilities. The increase should not only be for patrolling and apprehension duties but also for officials responsible for hearings and prosecutions. The use by the INS of the "voluntary departure system", which enables 95 per cent of all apprehended aliens to be simply returned to their homeland, should be actively discouraged. Records should be kept of the identity of all those arrested. Second offenders should be denied the prospect of ever becoming US citizens. Jail terms should be imposed on multiple offenders. In these ways a posture of deterrence rather than acquiescence could be assumed. At the same time a concerted drive should be initiated

¹ David S. North: *Alien workers; a study of the labor certification programs* (Washington, TransCentury Corporation, 1971), pp. 95-96.

² See for example Briggs: *The Mexico-United States border . . .*, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

by the INS in the cities in which illegal immigrants are known to reside in order to apprehend and return them to their native land. All appropriate civil liberty safeguards should be applied to ensure that no false arrests or mistaken deportations occur. But the message should be made clear: illegal immigrant workers from any country are unwanted guests. Concurrently, other immigration policy loopholes which tolerate daily and seasonal commuter workers from Mexico should also be eliminated.¹

Lastly, as indicated in the preceding section, the United States should provide financial and technical assistance for the development of Mexico's northern states. It should also alter its tariff and import restrictions as they pertain to Mexico so as to facilitate economic expansion. At first thought, it might seem inconsistent to argue for a restrictive border policy towards Mexican immigrants while simultaneously favouring increased free trade with respect to the import of Mexican products. This is not so. The impact of increased imports can be more widely spread throughout the American economy. Should there be any adverse domestic employment effects, it is far easier to see exactly which individuals are hurt than is presently the case with illegal immigration. Moreover, there already exists legislation in the United States in the form of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 which provides substantial benefits to assist the particular industries and workers that may be harmed by liberal trade policy adjustments. No such redress is available for citizens affected by unfair competition from illegal immigrants.

By now it should be obvious that this issue does not lend itself to any easy solution. In fact, illegal immigration into the United States confronts policy-makers with a dilemma. There is absolutely no answer that will make everyone better off. For in addition to the economic factors involved, there are also complex moral, political, social and diplomatic considerations. But no matter how many variables are placed in the final equation, the stark reality of the situation remains: unless the United States launches a massive foreign aid programme and relaxes its tariff and import barriers, hundreds of thousands of human beings are going to suffer no matter what is done or not done. Without such assistance, more restrictive border policies would condemn many of the would-be illegal Mexican immigrants to lives of squalor. On the other hand, if the prevailing situation is allowed to continue, thousands of US workers will continue to work under deteriorating conditions in a generally surplus labour market. There are numerous humane policy alternatives available to assist immigrant workers when the migratory flow is caused by excess labour demand. When immigration persists in conditions of labour surplus, there is little choice but to attempt to stem the inflow.

¹ See Briggs: *The Mexico-United States border* . . . , op. cit., pp. 15-21.